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THE JUDGE IN THE PARABLE OF THE THREE RINGS

“Und wenn sich dann der Steine Kräfte
Bei euern Kindes-Kindeskindern äussern:
So lad’ ich über tausend tausend Jahre
Sie wiederum vor diesen Stuhl. Da wird
Ein weis’rer Mann auf diesem Stuhle sitzen,
Als ich, und sprechen. Geht!”

This conclusion to the famous parable of the rings in *Nathan der Weise* is not found in Boccaccio.¹ Seldom has so impressive a character been presented in so few words as has this judge. One recalls the unnamed Physician in the sleep-walking scene in *Macbeth*, his “God, God forgive us all!” and the simple “Good-night, good doctor,” of the Gentlewoman. The story is ended pointedly and the judge presented as a man of great dignity and humility. The whole narrative is raised above the more commonplace Boccaccio into the realm of the ultimate and the symbolic, as Saladin immediately perceives:

“Nathan, lieber Nathan!
Die tausend tausend Jahre deines Richters
Sind noch nicht um.—Sein Richterstuhl ist nicht
Der Meine.—Geh!”

Of course, it is easy to read in, to sentimentalize. Düntzer² is in a measure right when he says: “Wenn aber Nathan den Richter die Kinderskinder der streitenden Brüder über viele tausend Jahre wieder vor denselben Stuhl fordern lässt, um von einem weisen Richter ihren Spruch zu empfangen, so ist dies nur eine Wendung, um das Märchen zum Abschluss zu bringen und die Beziehung auf Saladin einzuleiten; nichts liegt ihm bei den vielen tausend (“tausend tausend”) Jahren ferner als Schmidts “unabsehbare Zeit der Tugend” und eine “hohe Pädagogik des Erblassers.” Yet one feels that device though it be, it is extremely subtle, suggestive, and poetic.

There is, of course, nothing significant about the “tausend tausend.” We are familiar with the figures of *Märchen* and romance. We remember the hundred years that Briar Rose slept before the king’s son found her, the period of knightly quests, “A twelf-month and a day to seche and lere,” the three wishes, or walnuts, or daughters, or sons, the seven years of exile, and the

¹ *Nathan der Weise* III, vii. *Decamerone* I, iii.

² Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise*, Heinrich Düntzer, Leipzig, 1894, p. 205.

forty pounds, not to mention "Twenty thousand freres in a route." The parable here is in the nature of a *Märchen*; in fact, was such with the exception of this termination, which agrees well enough with the *Märchen*-like opening, "Vor grauen Jahren," etc. We may consider that this conclusion had its origin in the conventional form of the fairy tale and the necessity of the story; but I do not recall any fairy tale or romance with this sort of termination in a suspended sentence or judgment. Now there actually seems to have been a phrase of the law which in a less poetic form is almost identical with the utterance of the judge here. In the records of the Italian murder trial³ made famous by Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, occurs this incident narrated by Giacinto Arcangeli, Procurator of the Poor, as a precedent for leniency towards his client, Guido, the murderer. The passage reads as follows:—

"And not infrequently, in the contingency of such a deed, men have escaped entirely unpunished, who, when moved by just anger, have laid hands even upon the innocent. For a certain Smyranean woman had killed her husband and her son conceived of him, because her husband had slain her own son by her first marriage. When she was accused before Dolabella, as Proconsul, he was unwilling either to liberate one who was stained with two murders, or to condemn her, as she had been moved by just anger. He, therefore, sent her to the Areopagus, that assembly of very wise judges. There, when the cause had been made known, response was given that she and her accuser should come back after a hundred years. And so the defendant in a double murder, although she had also killed one who was innocent, escaped entirely unpunished."

This incident was widely known and alluded to by various writers.⁴ Particularly pertinent is Montaigne's use of it in that admirable essay which he humorously entitles "Des boiteux."⁵ He is speaking of the very reverse of "der bescheidne Richter" of the parable, of one who gave an ignorant, cocksure judgment where there seemed every probability of error. "Il me souvient (et ne me souvient aussi d'autre chose) qu'il me sembla avoir rendu l'im-

³ *The Old Yellow Book*, C. W. Hodell, 1908, Latin original, p. XXII, translation pp. 19-20, Everyman ed., p. 22. Date of trial, 1697-8.

⁴ Valerius Maximus VIII, 1; Aulus Gellius XII, 7, C. Cited *Essais de Mont.*, Paris, 1870, p. 539.

⁵ *Essais*, III, Ch. XI, *ibid.* pp. 536ff.

posture de celui qu'il iugea coupable, si merveilleuse et excédant de si loing nostre cognoissance et la sienne, qui estoit iuge, que ie trouvay beaucoup de hardiesse en l'arrest qui l'avoit condamné à estre pendu. Recevons quelque forme d'arrest qui die, 'La cour n'y entend rien'; plus librement et ingenuement que ne feirent les Areopagites, lesquels se trouvantz pressez d'une cause qu'ils ne pouvoient desveloper, ordonnerent que les parties en viendroient à cent ans."⁶

The whole essay is concerned with the common method of judging of the marvelous, and is marked to an unusual degree with Montaigne's good sense and wholesome skepticism. He tells of three young people who played at spirit-talking and of another superstitious judge: "Ces pauvres diables sont à cette heure en prison; et porteront volontiers la peine de la sottise commune, et ne scay si quelque iuge se vengera sur eulx de la sienne. On veoid clair en cette cy, qui est descouverte: mais en plusieurs choses de pareille qualité, surpassants nostre cognoissance, ie suis d'avis que nous soustenions nostre iugement, aussi bien à reiecter qu' à recevoir. Il s'engendre beaucoup d'abus au monde, ou, pour le dire plus hardiement, tous les abus du monde s'engendrent de ce qu'on nous apprend à craindre de faire profession de nostre ignorance, etc."⁷

Again he writes: "Voire dea, il y a quelque ignorance forte et genereuse, qui ne doit rien en honneur et en courage à la science: ignorance pour laquelle concevoir il n'y a pas moins de science qu' à concevoir la science."⁸ The same idea is repeated elsewhere in the essay.

And now for "der Steine Kräfte," a detail also not found in Boccaccio. Can there possibly have been a suggestion for the wise judge's decision concerning the marvels of the ring in this: "En ces aultres accusations extravagantes, ie diroy volontiers que c'est bien assez qu'un homme, quelque recommandation qu'il aye, soit creu de ce qui est humain: de ce qui est hors de sa conception, et d'un effect supernaturel, il en doit estre creu lors seulement qu'une approbation supernaturelle l'a auctorisé?"⁹ This was exactly the requirement imposed by the judge, a supernatural

⁶ Ibid. pp. 538-9.

⁷ Ibid. p. 538.

⁸ Ibid. p. 538.

⁹ Ibid. p. 539.

approbation, lacking that of the return, which in the old trial was a form of evasion, but which here is given a symbolic twist.

This essay might certainly have suggested both the test for the rings and the development of the character of the modest judge; barring that, do we not have in the "post centum Annos redirent" of the old and well-known incident of the Areopagus the origin of "über tausend tausend Jahre" rather than in the conventional form of *Märchen* which exhibit no parallel?

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